



February – Heart Health Month

Commanding Officer's Memo

Heart disease remains the number one killer of both men and women in the United States. While heart disease is often viewed as something to worry about when you get older, an estimated 41.4 million of the 83.6 million American adults who have cardiovascular disease are under the age of 60.¹ The good news is that heart health can be improved at any age through a nutritious diet that is low in saturated fats and salt, moderate to vigorous physical activity most days of the week, maintaining a healthy weight, and managing stress.

Coronary heart disease (CHD) is often not addressed until clinical signs are present, but researchers have found evidence of atherosclerosis, or plaque build-up in the arteries, in service members in their 20's and 30's. Additional research indicates a strong positive correlation between post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and CHD.^{2,3,4} While causation cannot be inferred at this time, it is hypothesized that the chronic stress of PTSD increases the risk of CHD.² The relatively high prevalence of PTSD in the military and veteran population indicates a need for increased efforts to reduce the risk of developing CHD among this population.

What can leadership do?

- Establish and support a worksite wellness committee.
- Create opportunities for good nutrition, physical activity, and psychological health by promoting healthy options in cafeterias and vending machines, providing time to exercise, and allowing time and ensuring access to tools and resources to de-stress when possible.
- Enforce the policy that prohibits all tobacco use in indoor areas and near building entrances and exits. Reduce exposure to secondhand smoke by establishing smoke-free worksite policies.
- Ensure that service members are completing their annual Periodic Health Assessment (PHA). During the PHA, members are screened to determine what prevention services they may need based on gender, age, and risk factors. They also receive education and guidance on how to prevent/improve health risks they may have.
- Install automatic external defibrillators (AEDs) as appropriate and train employees to use AEDs. According to the American Red Cross, improved training and access to AEDs



could save up to 50,000 lives per year. (This training can be coordinated with annual CPR training.)

- Serve as a role-model for preventive self-care by healthy eating, staying fit, and managing stress.

Resources

1. American Heart Association Inc. Statistical fact sheet 2013 update.
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2. Kubzansky L & Koenen K. Is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Related to Development of Heart Disease? An Update. *Cleveland Clinic Journal of Medicine*. 2009;76(suppl2):s60-s65.
http://171.66.127.177/content/76/Suppl_2/S60.full.pdf+html. Accessed December 19, 2013.
3. Vaccarino V, Goldberg J, Rooks C. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Incidence of Coronary Heart Disease: A Twin Study. *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*. 2013;62(11):970-978. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0735109713025060>. Accessed December 19, 2013.
4. Coughlin S. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Cardiovascular Disease. *The Open Cardiovascular Medicine Journal*. 2011;5:164-170.
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